

Removing *the* Barriers

Steelhead comeback achievable, study says

By Matt Carter
STAFF WRITER

IF MAN wills it, Central Coast steelhead could once again journey upstream through Fremont, Sunol, Pleasanton and Livermore to breed in their historic spawning grounds.

That's the conclusion of a soon-to-be-released study on the potential for restoring the steelhead to Alameda Creek and its tributaries.

If the study's recommendations are followed, work to get steelhead around many of the man-made barriers that keep the ocean-going trout from completing their stream-to-ocean life cycle could be completed as soon as 2003.

But first, the coalition of water agencies, environmental regulators and activists who helped prepare the study must line up the political support — and the money — to carry out its recommendations.

The idea of restoring steelhead to the Alameda Creek watershed has been kicked around for decades. Although discussions in 1989 never got beyond the planning stages, there are signs that this time, a consensus is building that the work can and should be done.

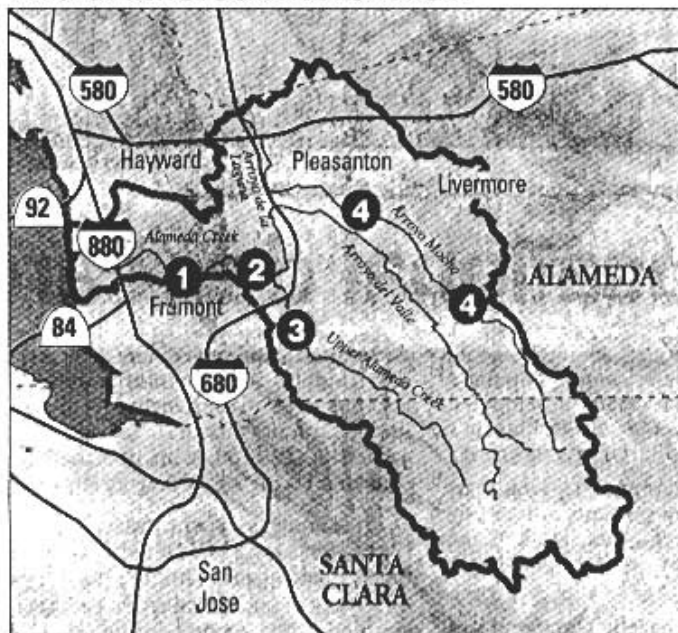
The Alameda County Water District's Board of Directors voted Jan. 27 to work with the Alameda County Flood Control and Water Conservation District on an application for up to \$5 million in federal funding to begin the work.

The backbone of the work recommended, as outlined in a draft version of a study to be released next week, includes:

► Building a fish ladder in Fremont around a 13-foot-high inflatable capture dam operated by the water district and an 8-foot-high flood control weir that prevents erosion around a Bay Area Rapid Transit rail crossing.



Alameda Creek watershed



Recommendations for restoring access for steelhead trout include:

1. Provide passage for returning steelhead around a 13-foot-high inflatable dam and an 8-foot weir that prevents erosion around BART tracks in Fremont.
2. Build fish ladder or remove the 12-foot-high Sunol Dam in Niles Canyon.
3. Modify the 10-foot-high PG&E gas line crossing in Sunol Valley to improve passage by building a fish ladder or weirs.
4. Improve passage to Arroyo Mocho by building small weirs or fish ladders at Stanley Boulevard weir and Lawrence Livermore Lab pumping station access road.

Sport fishermen once caught steelhead trout in the Alameda Creek watershed by the dozen, as this photo, believed to have been taken in the 1930s or 1940s, shows.

EAST BAY REGIONAL
PARK DISTRICT

“ My folks came from Oklahoma and saw the fish when they first moved up there. They didn't know what they were. . . . In the summertime, the creek never really dried up. The fish would get stuck in these pools of water. ”

Fish: Report urges to remove stream barriers

Continued from NEWS-1

► Removing San Francisco Public Utility Commission's 12-foot-high Sunol Dam in Niles Canyon.

► Modifying a 10-foot-high G&E gas line crossing in Sunol Valley to improve passage in Alameda Creek up to Little Yosemite in Sunol Regional Wilderness.

► Improving passage to Arroyo Mocho by building fish ladders around a weir near Stanley Boulevard and around an access road to a Lawrence Livermore Lab pumping station.

The study found that making those improvements and others could give steelhead access to 20 miles of suitable spawning grounds on public and private lands upstream of Fremont. Fish on their way to some spawning grounds would travel through Pleasanton in the Arroyo de la Laguna and Arroyo del Valle and through Livermore in the Arroyo Mocho.

Steelhead might also thrive again in Sinbad Creek near Sunol, where Randy Mills' family caught strings of fish just yards from their home on Kilkare Road into the 1950s.

"My folks came from Oklahoma, and saw the fish when they first moved up there. They didn't know what they were," Mills recalled. "My uncle came up here (from Modesto) and said, 'My God, they're steelhead.' In the summertime, the creek never really dried up. The fish would get stuck in these pools of water."

Part of the study involved genetic tests of landlocked

rainbow trout in the Alameda Creek watershed. The tests strongly suggested the fish are descended from steelhead trout that once made mass migrations to the ocean.

Because they are well adapted to local conditions like water temperature, the fish could be ideal for restoration efforts, the study found.

In fact, some scientists believe they may be the source of ocean-going steelhead that have been spotted in increasing numbers at the so-called BART weir in Fremont. In rainy years, young trout may be able to get down to the ocean, but can't get past the weir on their way back. Conservationists have been carrying a few fish past the barrier by hand.

The Army Corps of Engineers built the weir, the first big obstacle to migratory fish on the creek, in 1972.

The federal government might provide as much as \$5 million to bypass the weir and other barriers as part of a program designed to minimize the environmental impacts of corps projects built in less enlightened times. But there's only about \$25 million available from that program each year, and the project must compete with others for the money.

Backers of the study said a federal designation of the Central Coast steelhead as a threatened species in 1997 boosts the chances of a program to restore the fish to Alameda Creek. And, they said, increased public interest and more opportunities to land state and federal money for the project also improve the



In a family photo from the early 1950s, a young Randy Mills poses with his mother, Lorena, and steelhead trout caught in Sinbad Creek — just yards from their home in Sunol.

prospects.

Throughout the West, man-made barriers such as dams in the watercourses that serve as the steelhead's "roads" are coming down, said state Department of Fish and Game steelhead specialist Dennis McEwan. Nevertheless, a 1996 study estimated there were only about 250,000 steelhead in California — probably less than half the population of 30 years ago, McEwan said.

If fish can't get around it, a 15-foot obstacle is "as much of a barrier as Shasta Dam," he said. Even smaller barriers — both natural and man-made — can be obstacles depending on stream depth.

While water agencies support plans to build fish ladders, there are worries that they even-

tually may be required to allow more precious water to flow to San Francisco Bay if steelhead are restored to Alameda Creek.

McEwan said it's too early in the process to speculate on whether more water may be required.

But it is physical barriers, rather than water flows, that pose the biggest problems for steelhead — especially in relatively pristine watersheds like Alameda Creek, McEwan said.

"I've been saying for a long time that it's not so much the water as the barriers that brought the decline in the steelhead we've been seeing in the last 50 or 60 years," he said.

"We're not going to rectify all the barriers, but there are plenty we can start with that will keep us busy."